

ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT

**BLM, Bishop Field Office
351 Pacu Lane, Suite 100
Bishop, CA 93514**

EA Number: DOI-BLM-CAC-070-2013-0050-EA

Lease/Serial/Case File No.: CACA 054550

Proposed Action Title/Type: Owens Lake Groundwater Monitoring Well

Location of Proposed Action: Mt. Diablo Base & Meridian, California,
T. 18 S., R. 36 E.,
Section 13, NE1/4NE1/4.

Applicant (if any): Los Angeles Dept of Water and Power

Plan Conformance:

The proposed action would be the issuance of a less than five (5) year renewable road Right-of-Way (ROW) CACA 054550 for construction, operation, maintenance, and termination of a groundwater monitoring well.

The action is subject to the Bishop Resource Management Plan (BRMP), approved March 25 1993 and is within the Owens Lake Management Area. The BRMP has been reviewed.

The Bishop RMP states under General Policies on Page 8, No.1; "Management will be on the basis of multiple use and sustained yield as per Federal Land Policy and Management Act of 1976 (FLPMA) section 102 (a)(7)."

Under the idea of multiple-use and sustained yield, the BLM is authorized, under FLPMA section 501(a)(1-7), to grant Rights-of-Way (ROW), amendments, and temporary use permits for such uses as pipelines, roads, power lines, wells, and other facilities on the public lands for the public good. The BLM can authorize ROWs as proposed in this document under FLPMA and 43 CFR 2800 regulations.

The proposed action would not violate any specific decisions for the Owens Lake Management Area and would be in conformance with the direction for the management area.

The proposed action would not violate any decisions, guidelines or direction of the Bishop Resource Management Plan and would be in conformance with the plan.

Purpose and Need for Proposed Action:

LADWP has been implementing the Owens Lake Dust Mitigation Project. In support of this project, the department has proposed installation of fourteen (14) ground water monitoring wells around the Owens Lake. LADWP has made a ROW application for one of these wells located on public land.

The data collected from these wells would help develop groundwater level baseline around Owens Lake. Collected data would also be utilized to protect resources around Owens Lake. Should groundwater be used for dust mitigation activities at Owens Lake.

The need for the action is established by the BLM's responsibility under the Federal Land Policy and Management Act of 1976 (FLPMA) to respond to an application for a facility ROW for construction activities, facility installation, and operation of a ground water monitoring well on public land. This environmental document would be used to determine whether the proposed action is a significant action requiring an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) and whether a Decision issuing a monitoring well right-of-way, located on public land, should be approved.

A.1 Description of Proposed Action:

The proposed action would be the issuance of a FLPMA less than five (5) year renewable Right-of-Way (ROW) CACA 054550 for construction, operation, maintenance, and termination of a ground water monitoring well. The ROW would include dirt road access. See Exhibit A (Location Map).

The proposed well would be drilled to a depth of about 100 feet using a sonic well driller. The drilling rig does not require water or mud, so no fluid containment is needed. No surface preparation is needed for the site. Once drilled, the well would be tested and pumped to develop the well. The well would only be used for obtaining ground water samples and depth. No water removal would take place. The well would be cased and a 4 foot by 4 foot concrete pad would be installed around the case. Four steel posts would be installed at each corner to protect the well casing. A small battery operated data logger would be placed at the casing. The data logger would require a monthly visit to remove logged information.

Access to the site would be on existing 10 foot wide dirt roads. No road construction or maintenance would be needed. The road bisects a dried ephemeral playa where the well would be located. No vegetation would be disturbed since the access road cuts through the playa. Any surface disturbance from well construction activities would be smoothed flat. All equipment would be sprayed off to remove any accumulated dirt or vegetation prior to entering public land. A water truck would provide dust control during the construction. Any type of burrows would be avoided.

It is expected that the construction would take about one week and would begin in early September, 2013 or as soon as authorized.

A. 2. No Action Alternative:

Under the no action alternative, the proposed well ROW would not be issued and the proposed work would not be completed. LADWP would rely on thirteen other proposed wells for groundwater aquifer information.

B.1. Affected Environment and Environmental Impacts (Proposed Action):

Required Resource Analysis

The proposed action is not within a Wilderness, Wilderness Study Area (WSA), Area of Critical Environmental Concern, nor Wild and Scenic River corridor, nor Essential Fishery habitat and there would be no effects on any lands so designated. There would be no impacts to prime farm lands or water quality (including ground or surface waters).

There would be no impact to federally listed species or habitats. There are no BLM Sensitive species or habitats within the proposed action area.

Wilderness Characteristics

The public land surrounding the proposed action area was inventoried for wilderness characteristics in 1979 as part of the Cottonwood wilderness inventory unit (CA-010-053). The Cottonwood unit was determined not to have wilderness characteristics and removed from further consideration due to the influences of Hwy 395, multiple distribution and transmission power lines, maintenance roads for power lines, other existing dirt access roads, the LADWP aqueduct, and Cottonwood power plant. These structural and surface effects have not changed since the inventory. The area was reviewed in March, 2012. The existing disturbances still exist and the general area still does not have wilderness characteristics.

Air Quality

Air quality would not be affected. The proposed action is within a federal air quality Owens Lake nonattainment area. The action would result in an extremely small amount of PM₁₀ being emitted during the construction phases of the project. Water would be used during construction activities in order to reduce dust emissions. The dust emissions would be extremely low and would not exceed air quality standards.

Cultural Resources

A cultural resource inventory for the proposed project was completed in July 12, 2013 by the Bishop FO archaeologist and no cultural resources were located within the APE area of the proposed project. It has determined that there would be no impact to cultural resources as a result of the proposed action. The results of this evaluation are detailed in cultural resource report CA170-13-36.

Visual Resources

The proposed action area has a Class IV VRM rating. A Class IV rating allows for contrasts that may attract attention and be a dominant feature of the landscape in terms of scale, however the change should repeat the basic elements inherent in the characteristic landscape.

The Key Observation point for the proposed action would be along the northbound lane of Highway 395. The highway is a major transportation route along the eastern Sierras with travel speeds averaging 65 mph. The proposed well site location is about 500 feet east of the highway and below highway grade. The site location is alongside a 2 foot high elevated dirt road which separates the location from most viewing from the highway.

There would be a short-term visual impact from the drilling rig for about one week during well construction. This impact would be a short duration view to travelers on the highway due to the high speed of the vehicles. The view would last about 5 seconds. There is no mitigation that could reduce this short term impact.

The completed project would meet Class IV VRM standards. The proposed action would not be evident and would not attract attention nor would it be a dominant feature of the landscape in terms of scale. The changes would remain subordinate to the existing characteristic landscape.

Vegetation/Threatened and Endangered/Special Status Plants

Vegetation surveys were conducted on June 17 and 18, 2013 and documented by Owens Lake Groundwater Development Program Monitoring Wells, Biological Report, LADWP, 2013.

Vegetation, General

The proposed action area is an ephemeral playa about 2 acres in size with an elevated dirt road cutting thorough the playa. Desert saltbush scrub *Atriplex polycarpa* surrounds the playa. The playa itself has no vegetation.

Access to the site would be on an existing dirt road. No surface leveling would be needed for well construction. It is expected that no vegetation would be disturbed for the well construction proposal.

Special Status Plant Species

The BLM uses the term "Special Status Plants" to include:

- Federal Endangered, Threatened, and Proposed plants.
- BLM Sensitive plants. Sensitive plants are those species that are not Federally listed as Endangered, Threatened or Proposed for Federal listing, but which are designated by the BLM State Director for special management consideration. By national policy, Federal Candidate species are automatically treated as Sensitive. The California State Director has also conferred sensitive status on California State Endangered, Threatened, and Rare species, on species on List 1B (plants rare and endangered in California and elsewhere) of the California Native Plant Society's Inventory of Rare and Endangered Plants of California (unless specifically excluded by the State Director on a case-by-case basis), and on certain other plants the State Director believes meet the definition of Sensitive.

No Federally Threatened, Endangered or Proposed plants are known or suspected to occur in the project area. No impact expect to these resources.

No other BLM Sensitive Plants are known to occur in the proposed project area based on field surveys, historical records and a records search of the CNDDDB (California Natural Diversity Database). No impact expect to these resources

Invasive, Non-native Species

The proposed action area does not currently have any invasive or non-native vegetation species.

The disturbance associated with well construction and development may introduce invasive plants or non-native vegetation species through equipment brought on-site for the construction. Introduction or spread of invasive or non-native species could result in adverse impacts to the native vegetation. The severity of these impacts would be dependent in part on if a new invasive plant is introduced and if so, what that species is. In general though, due to the small size of the proposed project area and the relatively intact native vegetation community, probable impacts from invasive plants are expected to be slight.

The proposed action would require that any equipment be sprayed to remove accumulated debris or dirt that might contain weed seeds prior to entering public land.

Wildlife/Threatened and Endangered/Sensitive Habitat

Site specific wildlife surveys occurred June 17 and 18, 2013 and documented by Owens Lake Groundwater Development Program Monitoring Wells, Biological Report, LADWP, 2013.

Wildlife General

The area provides habitat for various vertebrate and non-vertebrate species. During the wildlife survey no wildlife species were encountered in the proposed project area. As part of the proposed action, any type of burrows would be avoided. The field inventory did not find any type of burrows, even small lizard burrows. The proposed action is outside the seasonal restrictions for migratory birds.

It is expected that during well construction activities, some wildlife species may be temporary displaced. This is an unavoidable slight impact to wildlife species.

There would be no negative impacts to migratory birds because the project activities would occur after the breeding season.

Threatened, Endangered, Candidate and Sensitive Species.

Although the 1993 BRMP did not identify the proposed project area as desert tortoise *Gopherus agassizii* (listed Federal and State Threatened) or Mohave ground squirrel *Xerospermophilus mohavensis* (listed State Threatened) habitat, recent studies for the Caltrans Olancho-Cartago 4-lane project have indicated that the proposed action area could be desert tortoise and Mohave ground squirrel habitat.

For the Mohave ground squirrel, the proposed action area is at the northern boundary of suitable habitat. Trapping studies for the proposed highway project have trapped individuals south of Olancho, about 6 miles south of the proposed groundwater well monitoring site. No individuals were trapped north of Olancho. This proposal involves surface disturbance activity associated with the set-up and drilling of a well. Even though no burrows were found, the proposed action would avoid any burrows located in the proposed action area.

Based on the lack of trapped individuals north of Olancho, and large distance from known habitat, the Bishop Field Office has determined that the project as designed would have no effect on Mohave ground squirrel population or habitat.

For the desert tortoise, the USF&WS designated critical habitat in 1994. The closest desert tortoise critical habitat to the proposed project is more than 60 miles to the south. The proposed action area is "uncategorized" in relation to tortoise habitat by the BLM. The nearest categorized habitat is approximately 18 miles south, listed as Category 3.

Category 3 habitat areas are not considered essential to maintenance of viable populations, are thought to have low to medium density populations isolated from higher density populations, and have unresolvable conflicts. The area surveyed by Caltrans in 2001 and the proposed groundwater monitoring well are within the Western Mohave Recovery Unit for the tortoise, but are not in specifically designated desert tortoise management areas.

On five separate occasions, during the months of April and May 2008, individual tortoises and dens were observed and locations were recorded by Caltrans District 9 project team members, south of the proposed monitoring well installation. During wetland/waters delineation surveys, a contract biologist reported observing a desert tortoise at approximately one mile south of the northernmost edge of the Caltrans Olancho 4-lane project limits and west of highway 395. This area is north of willow dip and near the proposed well monitoring site which is east of highway 395. This tortoise observation has not been verified by USF&WS or California Department of Fish and Wildlife.

Generally the proposed action area is at the northern most limit of desert tortoise habitat. The public land east of the Hwy 395 may be considered suitable habitat, but occupancy is thought to be unlikely or very low based on the limited number of reported observations west of Hwy 395. This proposal involves surface disturbance activity on a dried playa consisting of the set-up and drilling of a ground water well. Any potential impact to an actual tortoise, if one is discovered, can easily be avoided by not conducting the activity in the same area. Even though no burrows were found, the proposed action would avoid any burrows located in the proposed action area.

Due to the minimal amount of surface disturbance for the proposed project and the project designs, the Bishop Field Office has determined that the project as designed would have no effect on desert tortoise population or habitat. The proposed action would avoid any type of burrows located in the proposed action area. See Stipulations as attached to the ROW grant document.

Minerals

No impact. There are no known mining claims or mineral material lease in the proposed action area.

Economic Impacts

The proposed action by itself would not result in economic impacts at the county level except that eventual structure construction as a result of the property obtaining legal access would result in an increase in the county tax base.

Environmental Justice

There would be no disproportionate impacts to low income or minority groups, per Executive Order 12898 (2/11/94). There are no known local groups or low income groups that use the proposed action area.

Hazardous Materials

There would be no hazardous materials associated with the proposed action.

Adherence to Local, State and Federal Environmental Ordinances / Laws

The proposed action adheres to local, state and federal environmental ordinances and laws.

Discussion of Trust Status, Federal Trust Responsibilities, Tribal Sovereignty

No impact to tribal interests. The Lone Pine Tribe is within 10 miles of the proposed action. Although the Tribe has a long standing interest in the Owens Lake basin area, the tribe has not asserted any interest or concern for the public land area within which the proposed action would take place. The proposed would take place in a playa devoid of vegetation and an area with no cultural resources.

Land Uses / Realty / Rights-of-way

No impact. ROW Grant document would be issued using standard ROW stipulations.

Cumulative Effects

There are no cumulative impacts as a result of the proposed action. The installation of the monitoring well within an existing playa and the use of existing dirt road access would not result in any impacts to resources.

Description of Mitigation Measures and Residual Impacts:

There would no residual impacts.

B. 2. Affected Environment and Environmental Impacts (No Action Alternative):

Under this alternative the affected environment would be the same as stated under Section B-1. There would be no resource impacts:

Under the no action alternative, the proposed groundwater monitoring ROW would not be issued and the proposed road work would not be completed. LADWP would have to utilize the information from thirteen other monitoring wells which are part of this proposed monitoring project.

Literature Cited

Owens Lake Groundwater Development Program Monitoring Wells, Biological Report, LADWP, 2013.

California Invasive Plant Council, 2012. <http://www.cal-ipc.org/>

Sawyer, J.O., T. Keeler-Wolf, J.M. Evans. 2009. A Manual of California Vegetation, Second Edition. Sacramento, CA: California Native Plant Society.

Implementation Monitoring:

Bishop Realty Specialist would monitor project.

Persons/Agencies Consulted:

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Date: September 5, 2013

Reviewed By: _____ **Date:** _____
/s/ by Dale F. Johnson 9/9/2013
Environmental Coordinator

